

## University of Dundee

### Finding Our Fathers

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## Finding Our Fathers

In May of 2016, I (David) attended, as I have done for the past 6 years, the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) annual conference. I enjoy this conference due to its regional feel despite the number of international participants who attend. I was presenting in the pre-conference presentations (Purnell, 2017) and one of the audience members, Daniel, was attending ICQI for the first time. After my presentation, Daniel talked with me about my work. We went our separate ways afterwards.

It so happened that we were both staying at the same dorms on campus during our conference stay. We ended up outside at the same time and picked up our conversation. This time, we both spoke of our upcoming presentations, which were on related topics—our fathers. The conversation became lengthier and we exchanged stories in much more depth than I think either of us expected. While we both spoke of troubled relationships with our respective fathers, I was intrigued with Daniel's more positive recall of past events involving his father.

In the work I (Daniel) presented at ICQI 2016, inspired by the 'beautiful autoethnographies' of Bolen (2014), Chawla (2013) and Dealy (2014), I set out to preserve some of the *good* memories of my relationship with my dad. So I asked David, "What happy times do you recall with your father?"

"I only have one happy memory. As a boy of 6, I place my stomach upon the soles of my father's feet. Lying down with his back on the floor, my father lifts his legs as he simultaneously lifts me into the air holding my hands as I shout with excitement, "I am Superman!" That memory of flying around the living room is so far removed from all subsequent interactions with my father that it seems like a scene from someone else's life. This is the only time I recall laughing with my father. Everything from that point forward was not positive".

As I (David) consider my response, I wonder if I am just so angry at my father that it has simply become easier for me to remain alienated from him than to try to build a relationship with him. We ended our conversation with Daniel asking me another question, “What if I helped you remember happier times with your father? There may be more than just one...”

I (Daniel) wondered what if, through ‘griefwork’ (Letherby & Davidson, 2015), that is, sharing the grief about David’s absence of such beautiful son-father memories and supportively negotiating the meanings attached to this absence; together we might pull forward (Dealy, 2014) *some* recollections of occasions where and when his father at least tried to share his world. Through hindsight (Rivera, 2012), we may come to realize that our fathers did try to connect (Dealy, 2014) and that maybe, we also played a part in making it difficult for them. Concerned with the shaping of the self and writing about his experience of anorexia, excessive exercising and psychosis, Stone (2009) links starvation of the body to the repression of traumatic memory. For Stone (2009),

The body is shaped according to a desire which literally ‘consumes’ all else, sometimes even life. Analogous to this, selves are also shaped by the denial and repression of traumatic memory. When memory is too painful to bear, such repression is necessary to survival, but it also exacts a great cost. It is not possible in my view to perform a neat excision in which unwelcome aspects of one’s history are removed and everything else left intact and accessible. Instead, one is forced to close down large areas of the self, and may begin to forget there was even anything to remember. A self without memory is a thin self indeed (p. 68).

“I don’t think it is possible”, I (David) reply as the conversation unfolds. Being reminded of the lived and felt sense of impossibility, this ‘jolt’ conversation caused me to reflect on this failed relationship with the man I had referred to as Dad, but now only call my father.

“The absence of the father one has only met once can become stronger every time one watches someone else interact with their father” (Frers, 2013, p.429). Having a happy memory

of an ‘intimate father’ (Dermott, 2003) David has only ‘met’ once, what is at risk and what is there to be gained in seeking to remember further more happy memories of his father? Viewed in light of the excerpt above from Stone (2009), I (Daniel) wonder if David’s attempts over the years at performing neat excisions in which the unwelcome aspects of his son-father relationship have been removed has exacted a cost, leaving a ‘thin’ “Myson/Myself” (Watson-Phillips, 2016)? Has he closed down this area of the self, forgetting there was even anything to remember?

I (David) have tried talking with my father, but he presents himself to me as emotionally unavailable making it difficult to have a conversation outside of the weather and television topics that normally fill the awkward and silent space that is created every time our bodies are in close proximity to one another. The majority of the time that my father and I have spent together these past few years was spent in front of the television. On one level, the television can be viewed as a medium for interaction and on a different plane, “there is a sensuous quality to this experience which connects the family at a deeper level, one where sight and sound connect them in the depths of touch” (Tahhan, 2013, p. 49). The television, for me (David), however, became a device to avoid conversation. I think this awkward space is created because we do not know *how* to talk to one another. I think I am mentally transported back to when the sight of my father caused me fear, and perhaps my father is sitting in silence due to his shame of causing me fear. We don’t talk. Our extant relationship clings to that one happy memory I told Daniel I had with my father. In order to have a conversation, I have to detoxify that image of my father that causes me to still fear him (see Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon 1998).

## **Detoxifying the Relationship**

Detoxifying the image of father means recognizing that our fathers' have been wounded as well. Maybe my (David's) father is distant because he learned to be that way from his father; Grandpa never talked to us about anything. He probably didn't talk to his sons either. About his own father, Auster (1982, p.20) writes, "He never talked about himself, never seemed to know there was anything he *could* talk about. It was as though his inner life eluded even him". I think my father knows how difficult growing up can be, but he managed. I guess he thought I would manage to grow up without too much intervention also. Even when I was younger, there was so much silence between the barking and screaming of orders. That kind of silence can have negative effects.

I (David) think about the silence my father may have endured. My grandparents used to own a restaurant in Yanceyville, NC called the Red Pig. They lived in an apartment above the restaurant. My grandpa would often be in the restaurant passed out in a corner from drinking too much. As kids, my father and his sister would climb on stools to reach the beer taps to serve customers beer since my grandpa was in another drunken slumber. I imagine that my father had some hard years just like I did. I think the poet Robert Bly stated it well when he wrote of his father, "I began to think of him not as someone who had deprived me of love or attention or companionship, but as someone who himself had been deprived" (Bly, 1990).

Reflecting on the silence David's father endured invites me (Daniel) to think about the silence my father kept.

### *Bugged for Not Talking*

Raped as a child, then  
his father

died when  
he was fourteen.

A passport to  
grammar school education,  
he passed  
the eleven-plus.  
But to support  
his mother and sister  
down the mines he went.

Then kicked  
out of his own bed  
by the older children of  
his mother's new man.

Before meeting and  
marrying my mum,  
he lost,  
through miscarriage,  
his first child  
with another woman.

Years later  
married with his first born,  
then upon the loss of her father  
he was  
told by my mum:  
"It would have been much easier if  
it had been you".

"How can a man  
love his wife  
after she has said  
something like that  
to him?"

Yet he did, until  
the very end.

In a fit of anger,  
he used to say:  
"You will never understand".  
"You know nothing".  
"You haven't lived, Son!"  
"You don't even know half the story..."

Well,  
if you don't tell me, then  
how  
can I ever  
understand?

In the cancer ward,  
some weeks before he died,  
"Times are different now" he said.  
"Today, people talk about everything, but  
in our day,  
it just wasn't like that.  
We weren't as open.  
We just didn't talk like you do  
today".

Still,  
he didn't  
talk.

Like Auster (1982), "Impossible, I realize, to enter another's solitude" (p.20). To this I (Daniel) would add, it is even more impossible if your dad's solitude remains hidden and he is incapable or unwilling to reveal himself. Auster's grandmother murdered his grandfather. It happened "...precisely 60 years before my father died, his mother shot and killed his father in the kitchen of their house (p.37). [...] A boy cannot live through this kind of thing without being affected by it as a man (p.38). This invites the question, how were our fathers affected by what they lived through?

Perhaps our fathers, like Auster's (1982), worked hard because they wanted to earn as much money as possible - a means to an end: a means to money and, an end to the possible nightmare of poverty. Both our fathers were deprived in some ways. Perhaps my (David) father did not see a work ethic in his own father. Perhaps deprivation and pride are reasons our fathers worked hard to provide for our family. "With regard to family secrets", however, Rivera (2012)

writes, “the search for the ‘why’ is fruitless. We can never know any definitive why” (p.88). How dare we question what we haven’t been told – “it is seen as a treacherous act” (Rivera, 2012, p.93). With pain, sadness, depression, anger, resentment and fear of the potential pitfalls, why question?

Dad and Mom (David’s) got married so young, and teen marriages usually end up with one or both of the parents dropping out of high school (Pirog-Good, 1992), as was the case with Mom and Dad. Being a high school dropout, you often end up in a job you don’t like in order to provide for your family (Purnell, 2015). This creates tension in family relationships (Webster-Stratton, 1990F).

**“Father hunger”** (Long et al., 2012, p. 136)

We never considered how hard it was for our fathers to go to work every day, toiling away at a job they didn’t like. And even worse, seemingly having no other choices because their families were depending on them for their very existence. Growing up, our fathers did not have time for family; spending time with us was something remote from their daily life, making them a stranger in each of their perspective homes. Worse still, “As children, we lack the tools necessary to place what we see in a context that makes sense” (Rivera, 2012, p.93). How did we experience this distance between us and our fathers?

While recognizing the “ever changing nature of these narratives” and although devastating at the time, “feelings of bitterness, anger and a sense of loss without the love of their [our] fathers” can now be “more positively reframed and seen in the context of a somewhat normal relationship later in life” (p. 136). With Long et al (2012) then, we might ask is such a father wound to be considered normative developmental trauma?



In line with more contemporary accounts on good fatherhood, we have both been in search of our fathers beyond the role of ‘breadwinner father’ or ‘financial provider’ (Dermott, 2003). As they struggled with their own fathering, what prevented us from gaining an appreciation of their ‘micro-acts’ of intimacy, involvement, or attempts at connecting?

### **Tolerating horrific fathering**

Realizing the pressures on the fathers of our youth, gives us pause. Their anger, to a degree, was understandable. For men who find “...life tolerable only by staying on the surface of himself, it is natural to be satisfied with offering no more than this surface to others” (Auster, 1982, p.15). But we wanted more emotional intimacy with our fathers. How can sons get below the surface when the surface is where their fathers seemingly *want* to be? Emotional involvement (Dermott, 2003) and relational fathering (Watson-Phillips, 2016) are the hallmarks of ‘new fathering’ and contemporary fathering practices where “love and involvement, not discipline and authority” take center stage (Dermott, 2003, p.6). Yet, as we reflect back on the fathering we received, maybe their anger stemmed from fear. I (David) never thought of my father as being afraid. His fear was a family secret no one was allowed to discuss (see Poulos, 2008). Perhaps, though, I was too frightened to want to have the conversation.

In Clarke (2016) I (Daniel) wrote: “This is not the place for questioning the absence or presence of abusive, depressive, and repressive behavioral patterns which haunted(?) his fathering. I will address these patterns in another project” (p.2). Well, here is that project; or at least a step toward unpacking some of the horror and grief. Following Auster (1982), I acknowledge that “There has been a wound, and I realize now that it is very deep. [...]...if I am to understand anything, I must penetrate this image of darkness” (p.34). Dealing with the

troubled relationship with his father Poulos (2012) writes, we need to start with the “deep, dark background” before a “brighter story can emerge” (borrowed from Poulos, 2012, p.199). In my writing for ICQI 2016, I think I managed to create a *bright* future by concentrating only on the “fond memories” (Dealy, 2014, p.19) however, with Rivera (2012) I now think “looking back, especially within the context of the family, is necessary to move forward” (p.88). I am beginning to understand that I can never know why he is the way he is but the understanding does not stop the speculation: Who abused my dad? Where? And when? Did my mum know? For me (Daniel), as a newly-wed, “It does not matter. What does matter is that I have a wife...and I’ll be damned if my home is anything like the one I grew up in” (Rivera, 2012, p. 92). To move forward, perhaps, maybe, we do need to remember by looking back.

## **Remembering Father**

We use “autoethnography as a way to re-member (King, 2000; Myerhoff, 1982). By re-membering, we are not referring to remembering as a means to store, distribute, retrieve, and process information (Daneman & Carpenter, 1980), or as a framework of understanding (Seilman and Larson, 1989), or as a retention-learning mechanism (Ruchkin, Grafman, Cameron, & Berndt, 2003). Rather, we are referring to re-membering as putting pieces of the past and present together in a process of relational reconciliation (Purnell, 2015), which has been disrupted by lingering memories of childhood experiences that still haunt both of us as adults. This reminds us of Freeman (2010) when he writes of reflections as hindsight with the ability to “perform a kind of ‘rescue’ function” (p. 26). We are responding to Freeman’s call to “[take] up what could not, or would not, be seen in the immediacy of the moment” (p. 26) by re-membering times that have eluded us for years, but have resurfaced through our continued conversations. We

are therefore also yielding to Long et al's (2014) realization that "father hunger and the father wound need more empirical examination" (p. 136).

This paper started with our chance meeting at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) 2016. This year, at ICQI 2017, we picked up our conversation regarding forgotten memories of our fathers. During our conversations, we recall two "new" memories that we both shared as children we can "take up" and review for what we missed in the "immediacy of the moment." The first being that both of our fathers would take us on car rides and, as they changed gears, they would squeeze our thigh just above the knee cap. Neither of us really enjoyed this ritual; neither of us realized the possible connection that our fathers were trying to make with us as children. We only knew that the attempt caused more of a withdraw on our parts than our fathers wanted and more than we ever intended.

(Daniel)

In his red Maestro. Down town roads, along country lanes, through city streets. It could happen anywhere.

Time alone, a short car journey, just me and my dad. Going to see Ninna, coming home from the shops. It could happen any time.

Driving at a sensible speed, stopping at lights, winding down windows, feeling warmth of a summer breeze. It could come from nowhere.

(David)

I cannot recall the year of the vehicle nor the year of the purchase, but, at some point in the early 70's, my father purchased a new to him Ford F-150. I think it was a 1970 and it was purchased around 1973.

The first time I ever road with my father in that truck, he reached over as he changed gears and tried to "tickle" me by grabbing my thigh just above the knee. It hurt me though. The squeeze was too hard,

Holding onto the steering wheel with one finger, cigarette box in hand. Silky smooth unwrapping of a cellophane wrapper. Smoke begins bellowing. It could hurt.

Pulling away from traffic lights, accelerating out of a roundabout, changing gears. Old and big enough to sit in the front seat. Side by side. Knee near the gear stick. Leaning across, index finger and thumb outstretched. Stealthily, momentarily, clamping inches above my knee; one fluid movement:

gear change fist,  
claw grabbing thigh pinch,  
steering wheel clasp.

It could tickle.

tight. I remember trying to push his hand away, but my father was too strong. He laughed; I did not.

Anytime one of us would be alone with him in the truck, he would reach over and grab the thigh just above the knee cap. We would never know when, but we knew it would be somewhere between home and the destination or between the destination and home. Making the entire time with our father the most anxiety filled part of our day as we waited for

the gear change fist,  
claw crabbing thigh pinch,  
steering wheel clasp.

It never tickled.

Another happy memory we both had of time spent with our fathers was when our fathers would invite us to go on an errand with them. We would be riding along and, if they weren't grabbing our knees, they would accelerate as they neared known bumps in the road causing us to bounce up in the air and have our stomachs flip in a quick rush of glee. In hindsight, we both realize these recollections could be times when our fathers at least tried to share their world with us.

## **Missed Connections**

Bochner (2002) discussed how the stories of others allow us to understand our own stories. When applied to our own personal lives, we came to understand more about our own missed connection to our fathers through the conversations in which we have engaged during these two past ICQI conferences regarding the narrating of our own missed connections with our fathers. According to Dewey (1984), a noted pragmatic philosopher, the effect of individual experiences is that they break “through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things...are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought” (p. 349). Such desire and thought have been the catalyst for the conversations that Daniel and I have shared. The common things: a vice grip on the knee or speeding over a bump in the road have touched the deeper meaning of life for us as we both realize the awkward missed connections that were attempted by our fathers along their own journey of fathering—a journey on which was navigated blindly as there is no roadmap for this journey. These connections of which we are attempting to recover are also connected to place.

Places carry meaning because they are given meaning. According to Seamon and Sowers (2008), a sense of place cannot exist without an attachment made to it; attachments are usually strong and lifelong and made through the interactions—even the missed connections of our interactions. Therefore, the concept of place refers to the subjective experience of human interaction in the physical world. Place also encompasses the memories associated with it, which enforce our connection to or disassociation from place. We all make attachments to places. This experience of connecting prevents places and the interactions that take place within them from disappearing from our lives. Although there is a view which holds that desired son-father relationships “can be achieved with a relatively small amount of time being spent together”

(Dermott 2003, p. 13), without frequent or positive interactions, I (David) did not make those strong connections and I believe the memories of those interactions have faded from my consciousness.

All individuals, despite our differences, have a common bond. Meaning, we can make connections to the lived experiences of others that go beyond just an understanding of the stories we share. It is the similarities in stories that allow readers to make connections to individual accounts and helps to begin a conversation regarding the complexities of our shared connections as well as the struggle to find and maintain connections (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). These conversations involve personal inquiry (Bochner, 1994; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) and discovery (Goodall, 2000), which in turn create the relationship between the connection that is possible through the personal experience of storying (see Ellis, 1991). Daniel and I have a connection through our similar experiences with our fathers that is not only helping to maintain a connection between our friendship, but also helping us to recall these missed connections. Through the conversations we have shared, we have both made personal inquiries into the other's son/father relationship, we have made discoveries that have created a stronger connection to the storying of our relationship with our fathers.

### **Separate People/Different People moving forward**

We can come to see our fathers as separate people, different from ourselves. Perhaps seeing that separation and difference can help us to accept the men our respective fathers have become. That acceptance may help heal their relationship, but not without sacrifices. The sacrifice of a childhood yearning to have the father we had fantasied about has already been made. Instead we must now accept the father that we actually had as children. In this

acceptance, perhaps we can stop pushing ourselves to be more and do more, thus accepting the mishaps and our own missteps.

My (David) mother tried to have me interact with my father as a child. I ask my mother for permission to go to a friend's house, and she directs me to ask my father. I never ask; I'm too scared. When I was forced to interact with my father, it was awkward; neither of us knew how to do that dance. I want and don't want to talk to my father. Embarrassment, fear, and love fight it out silently along every neural pathway from my brain to my suddenly silent mouth. Perhaps it is easier to blame my father, than to forgive him. There is a certain amount of fear, horror even, when I (David) look at myself and see all the things I didn't like about my father. Men with alcoholic fathers often declare "I certainly don't want to be like my dad" (Long et al., 2014, p. 127) and this begs the question, "How frequently are alcoholic fathers perceived as being good dads?" We both need to take a hard look and break down the anger and disappointment in order to find the understanding required to accept our fathers. I (Daniel) also need to take a step back and break down the frustration I had with my father's drink-fueled fathering.

Wallace Stevens reminds us of...

...the son who bears upon his back.  
The father that he loves, and bears him from  
the ruins of the past, out of nothing left.

Every man needs to identify the good in his father, to feel how we are like him, as well as the ways we are different from him. From that, we believe, comes a fuller understanding for the man hidden behind the mask of masculinity and solitude (Auster, 1982). Being stoic, showing no fear when I (David) was actually scared shitless, kept my father hidden from me. The fear our fathers had, coupled with our fear of them, created a wedge between four lonely souls that

drifted in opposite directions. We want to find our way back to our fathers. We want this despite the fact that we may never know the entire story (Rivera, 2012). We want this so we can learn to live with our differences, not to resolve the issues but to live with them (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 11), integrating a sense of loss into our lives in meaningful ways (Letherby & Davidson, 2015).



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